

“The Seismic Shock of Resurrection”
delivered Sunday, April 24, 2011 – Easter
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Matthew 27:59-28:1

No one appreciates the props and the pageantry on Easter Sunday as much as the preacher. I am not talking so much about the crowds, although it's always good to see the church fill up on this climactic festival the Christian year. Rather, I am talking about the special Easter additions to worship – that help us express what we cannot fully put into words. The floral cross outside, and the Easter lilies inside, are like offerings of incense to lift our spirits with a sweet perfume of praise. The long list of names – we remember in the bulletin insert – reminds us of that great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on from their resurrected perch among the communion of saints. The hymns, and anthems, and brass instruments give flight to our highest hopes of joy inexpressible by words alone. As much as preachers study the scripture, and read and pace and ponder and procrastinate – working ourselves into an Easter sermon frenzy, we know as well as anyone that words alone cannot adequately proclaim this gospel event. Of course this is the reality on any given Sunday, but it seems especially true today. We need the procession, and the organ and the brass, and all your voices, as well as the hope you bring in your hearts – to even begin to get at the power of the resurrection to transform human life.

Reinhold Niehbur was one of the greatest religious thinkers of the Reformed tradition in the last century. Preacher, theologian, and prolific writer – he refused invitations to preach on Easter Sunday, preferring to sit in the pew for worship at one of the more liturgical churches – Episcopal, or Roman Catholic – churches with elaborate Easter liturgy and rich music, but very little in the way of a sermon – in order, he said – and I quote – “not to be subjected to some preacher making a fool of himself trying to explain the resurrection.” (1) (That's what I'm talking about!)

There is simply no way to explain it. We receive the joyful news of resurrection – with all the props – because each of us knows this is a story far too great and glorious to put into words. When you think about it, even the four gospel writers themselves employ all kinds of literary devices – as if to say – mere words can never contain what God has done. And not one of the gospel writers props up his words with the extras quite like Matthew.

Matthew's testimony is the largest and loudest and most earth-shaking of them all with cosmic dimensions not found in Mark, Luke or John. Matthew's account of the death and burial of Jesus goes into great detail to make sure we know the body really was dead, how it was wrapped, where it was placed, by whom, and with witnesses, and how enormous the stone was that sealed the tomb. Not only that, remembering how Jesus had said he would rise after three days, the religious leaders went back to Pilate requesting a guard of soldiers to make sure that dead body stayed

in the tomb – to dispel rumors of escape or resurrection. He was crucified. Dead. Buried. Sealed. Guarded. By Matthew’s account the dead body of Jesus was so tightly enclosed it would be absolutely impossible for it to go missing or get stolen or whatever. In this text, God’s power to raise Jesus from the dead reaches through layers and layers of high alert, red-level security.

So against the backdrop of a very sure and secure death, this gospel welcomes the cosmic forces of nature to help herald the good news of resurrection. An angel descends from heaven, riding the earth’s quaking, flashing like lightning, and dressed as in snow. You can almost imagine this dramatic act of God’s power – while the angel rolls back the stone with ease, brushes a loose feather from his shoulder, and crosses his arms, as if to say, “Well, so much for that,” while he sits down on the stone. The solid assurance that Jesus would stay in the tomb – that great stone rolled up tight against the grave – becomes a bench for the angel. (2)

Matthew exclaims the good news of resurrection as Tom Long has written, with “a shattering earthquake that rippled a seismic shock through history and signaled that the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope.” (3)

Everything has changed dramatically and eternally. Time itself changes: The Sabbath shifts from the last to the first day of the week to celebrate the inauguration of a new creation. The notion of “family” changes: By Jesus’ instruction to the women, the disciples become his “brothers” to call forth a new family among all nations. (4) The social order of things changes: The soldiers, representing the deadly powers of political and religious oppression, fall away like dead men, to make way for a little band of women and men to begin the teaching, healing, life-giving work of Jesus himself. The earth changes: The known world, which has suffered under the exhausting weight of death by violence, greed, poverty and disease, now quakes with new life. Matthew’s proclamation of resurrection is huge, loud and globally good news!

As one theologian has written: Matthew’s core theological point is that there is no merely naturalistic way of speaking of the resurrection. This is not about human capacities or possibilities. It is wholly about God’s capacity and determination. The goodness and mercy of God are not just about good people trying hard. Death – as a final conclusion to even the most finely lived human life is transcended, not because such goodness just naturally lives on. It is, rather, because God acts at the boundary of life we call death and does something altogether new. Here, we are confronted with God’s possibilities and not our own. The angel’s “*He is not here*” means there is deep hope out there in the world. (5)

And so we are sent – as the angel sent the women, and as Jesus commissioned them, “Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” Galilee is not only the place where Jesus had promised to meet up with them again. It is also the place where his ministry, which embodied the dawning reign of

God is lived out – where he called followers, healed women and men and little children, showed compassion on the suffering, the least and the lost, ate with sinners and outcasts, challenged the rich to care for the poor, and showed them all how the Messiah who would suffer for the sake of the suffering world, but would be raised on the third day to rescue us from sin and death. Our life begins, as Peter Gomes said, “When you realize that by removing the fear of death, Christ has given you, for the first time, full possession of your own life.”

When the earthquake hit Japan last month, the world began to reel at the vision of the horror of it all. So many lives lost; such bitter anguish in the face of death’s enormity; so much fear circling around those nuclear power plants and their potential meltdown, rolling black-outs and unimaginable disruption in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. In the wake of all of it, what did the Christian church begin to do? The Sendai church of the Nazarene, one of the few stable structures with running water, opened its doors to the community. People came and went from the church – first simply to bathe, then to organize volunteers to distribute supplies among those staying in shelters. Our own Presbyterian mission co-workers formed an alliance with the Sendai Buddhist Federation, providing bereavement services to prevent suicides. They planned joint memorial services; they offered grief counseling and spiritual support to those whose loved ones were killed or missing, because studies of suicide reveal – in the face of unanticipated death, the bereaved can suffer from an unbearable guilty conscience for having survived. So the Presbyterians are working hand in hand with others to offer love, patience, and condolence to prevent more death.

The list of how the followers of Jesus showed up in those far reaches of Galilee to do the work of Christ goes on and on, but is best summarized in the words of one Japanese pastor, who is helping orient teams to do relief work near the Fukushima nuclear power plant, who said this: “God is the only one who can take a triple disaster – earthquake, tsunami and nuclear radiation threat – and make something good come out of it.” (6)

God is the only one. God is the only one who greets each threat of death in our world – and in our lives – with the seismic shock of resurrection, giving those we have loved and lost – eternal life, blessing each one of us with new life, empowering us to do the work of Jesus, and redeeming the world with unending aftershocks of joy, hope, and praise.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Niebuhr quote from Jon Walton, “Meet Him in Galilee,” preached at Westminster Presbyterian, Minneapolis, 4/11/10.
- 2) Bob Dunham, “When is a Stone just a Bench?” University Presbyterian, Chapel Hill, 3/23/08.

3) Tom Long, *Matthew*.

4) Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 247.5) Cam Murchison, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, vol. 2.6) nazmissions.worldpress.com